

Lesley Battler | **Journal** | 2007-2008





## Journal archive project

### Introduction

As a young reader i was fascinated by diaries, journals, notebooks of all kinds. Perhaps part of that attraction was that they seemed a way of telling your own story, remaking the world as you went on. “They” never have the final say in your journal.

I grew up in a family that was shattered by mental illness and writing in a journal was a discipline and a way of keeping myself together; proof I could build an independent life. I was never big on recording my most intimate feelings or expressing myself. For me, the journal existed to help me let go and move beyond the emotional, interior world. I was so much more interested in recording the flora and fauna of the mundane. Daily life was exotic to me.

From the 1980s and on into the Naughts, I wrote in a journal, which I eventually transcribed into electronic format as a project to keep me occupied during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. At first it felt like a self-indulgent pastime, certainly a little irrelevant considering world-events, but as I continued I started feeling maybe there was some value to the project. I decided to preserve them as archives, format them as PDFs and release them onto the Internet where anyone can search, download and use any of the material for projects of their own.

To me, this journal is really an archive, portrait of an era as seen by one insignificant person. It's the insignificance that is truly key here. I love the archives and records of the invisible lives that accumulate into social zeitgeists. Being a journal, it's hit-and-miss what I wrote about, or had time to write about. Huge chunks of my life never made it to the page while there may be hundreds of words devoted to a movie I enjoyed on a hot summer night. I have not added any narrative arc or changed names to keep the journal as intact as possible.

In such a long time span the journal volumes reveal a generation trying to find their way in the world; me and so many of my friends and acquaintances working contract jobs, going to community colleges to learn vocational skills. Spoiler alert: societal change, turbulence, employment issues, generational conflict were just as strong then as they are now. While transcribing the journals I also became fascinated by the rhythm of daily life, how periods of calm so often erupt into times of intense change.

I have taken the original journals and reformatted them into chronological years that begin in January and end in December, and I have included a synopsis with each one to provide a little context. I preserved as much as possible the style and quirks of the original handwritten journals and only employed some light editing to correct place names, and obvious mis-spellings.

These volumes are meant for anyone who is interested in the 1980s and 1990s, in archives, in the lives of young people trying to find a place in the world, in personal impressions of socio-economic-cultural events. This, of course, includes the introduction of the Internet to our daily lives. Please feel free to browse, reuse, recycle any of this material for your own projects. After all this time I still believe information wants to be free.

## **Vol. 22, 2007-2008**

Still in Calgary – In the belly of Shell Canada – Foot surgery – Inuvik or Bust – Northern BC – Whitehorse – Dawson City – Dempster-Driving – Beringia – Inuvik – Tuktoyatuk – End of the road.

## July 2007

When I was a kid I thought it would be cool to break a bone and swing through the world on crutches. Everyone would feel sorry for me and sign my cast. Strangers would praise me for my pluck, good humour and of course, humility. Well this is definitely not how it goes. I started feeling serious pain in my right foot during a trip to Vancouver and chose to undergo surgery to re-set the bones in my big toe to correct a really misshapen bunion). As soon as I returned from my trip I entered a foot clinic and signed up for the surgery. Walking is one of the most important things in my life.

First thing I've learned is that surgery isn't the way it's portrayed (or not portrayed) in gossip magazines. Celebrities don't just go under the knife and re-emerge a day later even more glamorous than they were. It takes forever between the stage where you're gobbling pain pills to the beginning of normality. Never mind transformation. Surgery is drastic. It doesn't matter what you tell yourself, or what you think you know about yourself in terms of capacity for pain. For a long time, my right foot was in charge. As soon as they wheeled me into the OR, I could only live through it.

Holy Cross Hospital featured the usual khakis and bilious greens, waiting rooms full of vulnerable people. I emerged from the anesthetic at some point while the operation was in progress. I popped my head up and watched the surgeon and nurses at work. The skin on my metatarsal plate was rolled back and I detected a small square of red, shaped a bit like Saskatchewan. The surgeon looked up, alarmed to see me looking at him. A male nurse in scrubs rushed over to me, wielding another needle. "Why can't I watch," I said. "It's kind of boring just lying here."

"Because of the chance of infection."

"What infection? I can't move, much less touch anything."

“How do you think he’s going to work with someone looking over his shoulder?”

“Excellent point,” I said and extended my wrist for another shot.

I woke to find my foot had turned into a huge cartoon turkey drumstick, wrapped in a brown bandage.

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Moving on crutches is difficult and completely exhausting. I was completely unbalanced, my right foot encased in a walking cast and fuzzy black bondage boot I was reduced to asking Fred for every little thing. I could crutch my way to the refrigerator, take solid foods out, slide them down the counter. I could place items like cheese and crackers or bread in a baggie. Curl the baggie around the crutch. Stump to the table. Place the items on the table. Turn the chair around so I would have enough space to hold my foot out so it couldn’t bear weight.

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At night I lay on top of the bed with my foot propped up on cushions, ice bag wrapped around my angles. Plus 30 degrees and I’m having hot flashes. Popped Goliath Tylenol to dull the sizzling of the millions of nerves running through a foot. Electrical charges in the metatarsal. Innumerable tiny bones in a foot. None willing to let me sleep. My beloved Boris kept me company. It often seemed as if I were on a life-raft. Very close, private, secluded feeling.

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Two weeks in. I can reach the coffee machine, place the globe and filters in the canvas sack I wear around my neck. I can retrieve the coffee from the fridge, slide it from counter to counter. Stump to the machine. Prepare the coffee. Klank to the table. Lay crutches on floor. Hobble two steps to the chair where I sit down and read while waiting for the coffee to brew.

Coffee ready. Put book down. Rise slowly. Put all weight on left side and hope my left knee doesn't blow out. Pick up crutches. Thump to counter. Pour coffee into thermos. Seal thermos tight enough to place in canvas bag. Transport liquid cargo to table. D'oh! Forgot the mug. Pick up crutches again. Klank to cupboard, reach for mug and drop it in the sack. Return to table. Pour coffee from thermos into mug. No coffee has ever tasted this good.

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Shower time. I can't use the main floor bathroom. This means a journey to the shower in the basement. Open basement door and face thirty shallow steps. Sit down. Send crutches down the stairs. Slither down on your butt, step by step, always keeping weight off right foot. At bottom, grab railing and place entire weight on left knee. Promise your poor left knee you will make it up to her. Rise, grip crutches, pick your way to the shower. Run the water until it's somewhere between freezing and scalding. Test with left foot as hands are insensitive to temperature. Tie a garbage bag around your bandaged right foot. Slither into the shower cubicle. Wash your body while keeping your right leg away from the water.

Boredom is not an issue. Days pass very quickly when it takes at least twenty minutes to perform the smallest task. Preparing coffee and bathing have become projects requiring planning and logistics. The one thing I couldn't do was make my own dinner. I could prepare food but couldn't transport anything that didn't fit in the bag from counter to table. I also couldn't stand at the counter long enough to eat dinner there.

Fred and I went to Toys R Us where the first thing I noticed was that in a big-box devoted to children's play there wasn't a bench anywhere. God forbid if you were pregnant or actually had to tend to a real child. Never mind being disabled. I crutched behind Fred as a genuinely helpful sales associate talked to him about toy wagons with rubber wheels. I couldn't participate much, as I was exhausted and unable to sit down.

Finally we found a little plastic wagon large enough to place a plate of food, yet small enough to attach a rope to it and steer it from room to room. It was a bright pink and turquoise box on wheels and featured Dora the Explorer.

"She's really popular," said the saleswoman.

"Dora is perfect for this," I said.

We brought Dora back and the first thing I made was popcorn. I successfully wheeled a brimming bowl to the bedroom where I lay back, propped my foot up and watched a re-run of *Law and Order*, the episode where McCoy played Grand Inquisitor to a corrupt and incompetent surgeon. “Death penalty,” I muttered. “That’s the least he deserves.”

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The outside world is loud, hot and treacherous on crutches. I had also been shut-in for two weeks. Never felt more vulnerable in my life than boarding the C-train on crutches. I wasn’t reckless enough to attempt returning to work during rush hour. Fortunately at 9:30 I could get a seat.

Just moving on the crutches was exhausting. They strafed my hands and armpits. My left foot took a pounding and swelled up until it was almost as misshapen as my right. I couldn’t breathe properly. I counted out every step, twenty steps before catching my breath. Uneven pavement, potholes, grates catching the rubber tips of the crutches. Construction signs blocking sidewalks. Detours. Entire sidewalks closed, stranding me on corners. I drooped, gasped, plotted logistics. Would I even make it to the office? Picked my way across intersections, desperately trying to avoid a face plant in the middle of 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. People swarmed, tailgated, cut me off. I bruised my thighs trying to get through doors.

Most washrooms only claim to be accessible for people with disabilities. I found large cubicles with heavy latches, no handrails, doors opening in or out. Finding washrooms at all was another exercise in logistics. Luckily I knew the office tower beside the one where I had worked on the secret Nig project had doors with buttons. The lobby leads to a Second Cup where I could get the crutches in and head to the elevator and go up to the Plus 15 level and continue straight on into Shell Centre. Travelling through the Plus 15 passages felt much safer than being in the street. Even so, some doors slide open, some open in, some open out. Push, pull. Steep grades on some of those ramps. I was grateful for the courtesy bred in the business world. It may be superficial but I really appreciated it today.



Finally, my workplace. A haven, I thought. Surely Shell Canada would be completely equipped. Safety, diversity, inclusiveness, etc. There was an automatic handicapped door at lobby level. This door led to a zigurat of concrete steps. No railing. There was a ramp but it was about twenty minutes away from me (in crutch time). I sent the crutches down the cement steps and bummed my way down. I felt like a shucked mollusc. I half-hoped an activist would snap a photo of the poor wretch slithering down the steps of the multinational energy giant.

### **Nov. 27, 2007**

Boris went to the Rainbow Bridge this morning, two years after Natasha left us. Dr Laura presided, a real honour as she doesn't usually do this kind of work. She was Natasha's chiropractor for many years. After over five years of refusing to succumb to kidney failure, Boris's body finally shut down. He hadn't been feeling well for the last few weeks and had pretty much stopped eating this last week. A serious sign for Boris. He spent most of his time lying on me in bed.

Last night when I came home, he didn't come to the door to greet me. He couldn't eat, or move, and although he was still conscious and alert, he was too weak to respond. He lunged for me once, early on in the evening, but when I moved he wasn't able to climb back onto my chest. He remained beside me, in exactly the same position until morning. Morning came. It was time. I knew in my mind and now my heart it was time to let him go. He knew it too.

He said goodbye to two of his favourite places – the bathtub and garden. I turned the tap on for him one last time and he had a drink and then he went on his walk through the garden. Fred took some photos of him as he walked in snow. The flash lit up the falling snow, making it look like shimmering planets, spheres, maybe even spirits welcoming him to the Other Side. A magical, haunting photo.

He was completely docile on the trip to the vet. He just rested on my dressing gown. As soon as we arrived at Marda Loop, Dr Laura greeted us. He held his paw out for Laura's needle (Boris usually hates vets and getting a needle. I held his paw, she slipped the needle in, I felt his body gently fall, then one last alarming gasp. Boris loved life so much I feared he was still not ready to leave this planet but Dr Laura said this kind of gasp wasn't unusual. My heart is broken. It just hurts so much. And the house is so empty and dark now.

### **Dec. 24, 2007**

I really enjoy working on the day before Christmas. I was one of two (three counting the driver) people on the bus, until we picked up two more on the crest of the hill, fastest ride ever. Early morning disguised as late night, ghostly swish of traffic moving on Macleod Trail. Sat back, earphones on looking out at stars, planets, galaxies, the Johnnie Rocket car wash. Crossed the Elbow, passed the casinos of Babylon, the Round-Up Centre. Bogmen peered from peat mounds at 10<sup>th</sup> Street, others drowned in brown linoleum. Then the shimmering Olympic Plaza stop where no one gets off. Turn into detour labyrinth. The bus leaps over hedgerows, streetlights wander to the sea, foghorns low from the depths of the Encana pit, backhoes frozen mid-bite. Lights dance in downtown atriums. I enter the Shell Canada head office building for another day of dialectic gymnastics in the bastion of oil and gas. No one here except me and the contractors.

An ASAP fable (or Talking to Project Engineers)

Plip?

Alarp.

Orp. Grp.

Var!

## June 2008

Sunday night shooting (EMS exercise). The destinies of thirty people were handed out at Chinook Centre. Someone took out a makeup/paint box and made my flesh look pale, ghoulish. Blue highlights around my nose and chin. Meanwhile, a volcanic wound erupted on Fred's head. Roger's flesh was punctured with glass shards. Kent's shirt was torn at the back, revealing a festering wound. Finally we were all led off on our zombie road trip. Shots burst through the shopping centre. I slumped to the floor. More shots. Security jesters capered down the aisles of the consumer palace, cavorting past Claire's Accessories and La Senza, which was conducting a sale on bras and panties.

As directed I lay on the carpet, life force fading fast, too weak to move or call. Nothing happened. Nothing kept happening. I admired the cool blue track lighting, the calm off-white of the ceiling divided into peaceful rectangles. Starbucks-style jazz played on. More shot. Screams, cries. Banshees howled. I couldn't see any of my fallen comrades, only hear cries and screams. BAP BAP BAPPAPAPAPAP. The sax noodled on, the escalators continued flowing up and down. Police swarmed the atrium. More gunshots. A stand-off. I saw emergency services techs drag bodies across the floor of Chinook Centre to a macabre staging area, enclosed in plastic sheets, by one of the entrances.

Two EMS techs crouched by my side, asked me what my pulse rate was. But all I knew was that I was unconscious and designated a Code Red. The techs grabbed me by the ankles and dragged me down the floor of the Chinook Centre. My sweatshirt hitched up and the tiles chafed my back. I could feel the dust and dirt in my pores. Finally deposited in the pen with a few of my fellow zombies. Human cargo, branded, coloured in triage. Cold and damp in the transit camp. Far away the partisans are stirring. At home it's finally spring. We wait in the lines for the final approach to begin. Shadow figures stagger through winter.

I was placed on a long narrow board and strapped in. Two techs picked me up and I jounced in the air. All I saw were the tops of boutiques, strange angles. Into the elevator. Out into another corridor. Chinook Centre turned into an eerie courtyard. Passages, locked rooms, tinted glass, incomprehensible signs, runes. Prices, discounts swam in front of my eyes and the Starbucks jazz continued babbling through the eternal twilight of the mall. Finally I was loaded into the ambulance and locked in place. The whole exercise was fascinating.

## **July 2008**

### **Inuvik or bust**

#### **Transcanada to Vancouver**

– Cloud rolls in. Mountains lurk, stalk you down the streets, tail you in their trenchcoats, berettas in their pockets. LaFarge Cement Factory. Sauron's world. Beautiful clear lakes of blue, green, indigo. The Harvie Heights Hamlet sounds like a Nancy Drew mystery. Into Banff National Park. Drizzle. Yoho Lake, Spiral Tunnels. Field, BC dominated by mountains, toy railway tracks. Tight curves, corkscrews, truck convoys. Slept in truck stop at Revelstoke alongside the trucks and bus-sized RVs.

– Around Revelstoke a lot of signs for various tourist attractions appear. Three Valley Gap Ghost Town. Enchanted Forest, a fake wilderness within wilderness. Why does this exist?! Amphibious Rides. Larger-than-life soldiers line up along the road to Beardale Miniatureland. Craigellachie is now a pleasant rest area with picnic benches, gift shop, rocks imported from Scotland and a commemorative plaque for the Last Spike.

– Tiny dilapidated houses, trailer parks, rusting vehicles. Metawaka, a tiny town at the foot of mountains, ubiquitous railway. Sicamous calls itself “the Houseboat Capital of Canada,” and also offers “Frontier Golf.” Shuswap Lake, tourist epicentre. S-bend roads. At Salmon Arm a lumber mill basks by the highway as if it is a tourist attraction.

– Sorrento Heights, Squilax, Chase, all a schizo blend of logging and tourism. Mountains erode into beige bluffs becoming sere. Tumbleweeds! Alpine vistas turn to sub-desert scrub, some badlands, rusted lodgepole pine eaten alive by mountain pine beetles. We pass this and stop at the Blue Moose Café in Hope.

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### **Richmond/Vancouver**

– Four days in Richmond with Christine Lambert and Jay Willoughby from Fred’s online Delica forum. They live in a wonderful old house in the middle of an upscale suburb. They’re renting this house from a musician from the group Winterharp, and they know Lori Pappajohn works as a mechanic for Boston Whaler and the backyard is clogged with boats.

– Christine has turned the house into the Tardis Deli Motel, with a guest room designed like a hotel, TV mounted on the wall, a basket of tiny soaps and shampoos, fluffy white towels.

– Fred spent a day on a Deli tune-up and boat trip with Jay to Bowen Island for a Boston Whaler meet. I went into Vancouver and on my return took the wrong line on the Skytrain and ended up in Surrey. A little late returning to the Tardis Deli Motel! Next day I bought a day pass, travelled the Skytrain, prowled through New Westminster and then to Gastown. Power outage in downtown Vancouver caused chaos. Took the Skytrain again, this time making it back in time for a backyard barbecue in Richmond. I really enjoyed their company and wish I could see more of Christine.

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### **Sea-to-Sky Highway**

– Extension of Highway 99, a former logging road that now connects Vancouver, Squamish and Whistler. Busy, curvy, squeezed between sea and mountain. Mudslide warnings. Porteau Cove, blue serenity beyond a coast battered by driftwood, upended trees, stumps the size of shipwrecks. “An old ship has been sunk here to attract marine life.”

- Squamish Food, Gas Lodging: “Western Canada’s largest collection of railway equipment including the Royal Hudson Steam Engine.”
- “Logger’s Lane is designed to help visitors and locals enjoy the area.”
- Steelhead coho, Dolly Varden and Kokanee trout.
- Brandywine Falls named after two railway surveyors who wagered for the height of the falls in brandy and wine. That sounds like the railway!
- Kellogg’s Glacier-Fed Cheakamous Lake.
- Whistler Village. Generic Euro-ville with pedestrian plazas, patios, bistros, boutiques, etc. People from all over the world congregating without interacting with each other. Corporations disguised as alpine lodges. Rustic Starbucks, Roots, the Gap; the whole gang dressed in business casual for some alpine team-building.
- Pemberton: “The Goldrush and native culture; PetroCanada gas station.” Road winds, rises, swoops. “Roads to Moscow” came on iPod shuffle, the perfect accompaniment to my most intense driving experience to date.
- Highway crossed Lillooet River Delta, turns up a steep hill into the Cayoosh range of the Coast Mountains. Former logging road, full of hairpin turns and it was growing dark. Rock walls loomed, herded us between painted lines and Stygian rivers. We washed up in Lillooet, at Cayoosh Creek, high above the Fraser River.
- Lillooet was tiny, a constellation in deep space. The only place open was a Subway and we were ecstatic to find that. A smiling East Asian girl made our sandwiches. I wonder how she ended up here? The community began in 1863 during the Cariboo Gold Rush. I wonder how it continues hanging on. Slept by the CN tracks, ten kms north of the hamlet.

### **Cariboo Ghost-Rush Trail**

- Clinton sits on two goldrush routes; the Cariboo Trail from Lillooet and the Cariboo Wagon Trail from the Fraser Canyon. Founded in the 1860s as a roadhouse for goldrush stampedeers heading for the interior.
- Headed into interior BC. Stopped at the Shell station, brushed teeth, changed clothes and back on the road.

- 70 Mile House, 80 Mile House, farm equipment museum, 93 Mile House, 100 Mile House
- Bedrock, box canyons, pink volcanic rock
- Roadhouses containing cafés, gift stores, lounges, restaurants. Many with brand new RV camping facilities.
- Williams Lake, Quesnel
- Prince George, a tough little city with attitude. Seemed so small under an overcast sky. Drugs, chronic poverty without the air of hope and renewal I've seen in other places, including Lillooet. This is a city of 80,000 people and is BC's fourth largest city. Unbelievable. Dinner at the Waddling Duck, which was great.
- Smithers, a smaller, scrappier Canmore. The first in a series of wonderful public libraries where travellers congregate for their computer/Internet fix. Met Bruno from France. He is with the World Wildlife Fund and has travelled all over the world. He drives a Landcruiser, which looks like a cross between an ambulance and a paddy wagon. The windows are barred to prevent monkeys from attacking. He told us tales of Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Congo. The Little Prince is painted on the side of his cruiser.

### **Cassiar Highway, Highway of Tears**

- Highway 16, Highway of Tears. Yellow billboards warn Indigenous women to not hitchhike because of a serial killer. This is not a government message. This is personal. One of the posters features photographs of three missing girls. It is heartbreaking, very personal and powerful. It brings what is too often an abstract "issue."
- Bridge across the Skeena River.
- Wild totem poles at Kitwanga/Gitwangak. Also a tiny corseted Anglican church. Lovely wild cemetery, headstones surrounded by picket fences and wooden crosses. Plastic flowers, some protected by plastic sheets. Some old graves, not yet reclaimed, enclosed in fences built of silvered wood, barely legible printing on crooked markers.
- Visitor centres, drive-by history, ad-hoc displays, labours of love. History as a living on-going project and part of community. I love these centres and lodges.

- Missing person posters, rusted gas pumps. Race Trac, Fas Gas.
- Makeshift houses, reservations, Indigenous/white settlements and posts overwhelmed by mountains, trees, steeped in cloud, huddled together at the base of bluffs as if they had been picked up, carried off and deposited where the winds took them.
- Everywhere Robert Service, Royal Northwest Mounted Police, taxidermy, bleached moose antlers, homemade baking, bumbleberry pies, puck-sized cinnamon buns.

### **Stewart Crossing**

- Dark and rainy at Stewart Crossing. Tiny Goldrush community. We found a B&B on the way to a wet campground. A young woman in pyjamas opened the door to us. Bare-boned but hospitable and offered bed, shower and breakfast; a very welcome refuge. Good talk with our hosts over breakfast. Her partner works in the mining industry.
- Stewart-Hyder Access Road, breath-taking mountain pass meets tropical rainforest, suspended above a glacier. Bear gates, avalanche paths, heavy fog. A man perched at the rest area sold CDs and videos of his photography. He seemed to live out of his car that had New Brunswick licence plates.
- The glacier resembled a cool bluish brain.
- Glaciers, cinder cones, craters, lava flows
- 1958 burn at Iskut; forest fire as tourist attraction
- Boreal white and black spruce, trembling aspen, lodgepole pine, western hemlock, red cedar, hybrid white spruce.
- Brake check pull-puts, oversized trucks, “Pilot Car - Do Not Pass.”
- Spent night at Mountain Shadow RV park.
- Jade City, Population 12.
- Alaska Highway. Everywhere interpretive centres and books about every stage of its construction.
- Continental Divide.



## **Watson Lake**

- Excellent visitor centre. Signpost Forest started by a US Army soldier working on the construction of the Alaska Highway in 1942. He erected his own milepost, for Danville Illinois and visitors are still adding signs. Fascinating how something can grow from a small personal act. There are currently over 60,000 signs and is truly delightful.
- Heliport, float plane
- Northern Lights Centre, a planetarium presenting shows on space (*How Big is the Universe* and *The Northern Lights*). Incredible setting for these shows.
- Met up with the Andersons in the restaurant and at the Belvedere Motel.

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- Teslin, population 411, began as a trading post in 1903 and is one of the largest First Nations population in the Yukon. Long pause at the wildlife display in gift shop. More irresistible history.
- Carmacks seemed like a sinister little place. Youths loitering, broken vodka bottles along the boardwalk. Visitors' centre was presided over by a young pregnant white woman who knitted while a small child stared into a small pink monitor.

## **Whitehorse**

- “Wilderness City of Canada,” “North of Ordinary.”
- Baked Café was the meeting place for students, tourists and all species of computers, especially Macs.
- Designated tourist parking; three-day free parking visitor passes
- Frostbite Music Festival, Jimi Hendrix mural on music store wall, Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous, the Chocolate Claim, Lil's 1950s Diner, Whitewater Rodeo.
- Vaudeville revues, SS Klondike down Robert Service Way, Mad Trapper bowling alleys, Muktuk sled-dog adventure with drop-in mini-tours.

- All-day lineups at the Klondike Ribs and Salmon, caribou and buffalo smokies.
- Certified gold nuggets, Hide on Jekyll Hostel, Sam McGee's loghouse, powerful First Nations mural in an overcast sky.
- Fjord Express to Juneau; "Visit Beringia Interpretive Centre – Add 40,000 Years to Your Vacation."
- Trapping supplies, boggans (sleds), wall tents, fish nets, tanned furs, snow shoes.
- Work the Block (ice sculpture contest).
- All about Faro. Possibly named after the Egyptian pharaoh pictured on playing cards from 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Some wonderful terminology: buck the tiger, the lookout, the coffin driver, coppering (playing a card to lose).
- "Fluke of geology decides a miner's destiny."
- [urbanyukon.com](http://urbanyukon.com)
- Percy De Wolfe Memorial Mail Race.
- The breath-taking and haunting Beringia Centre.
- The Beringia Centre almost seemed sparse compared to the Transportation Centre. This centre contained a more comprehensive history of the Yukon than the MacBride Centre downtown. So much of the history of white settlement in the Northwest revolves around movement, transience, transportation. This is a world where cat-trains exist in the same realm as scimitar cats and Norcan ushered in a Golden Age. It is interesting how many industrial/transportation/equipment museums exist in the Yukon, and how kind history has been to fortune-seekers, gold rush stampedeers, explorers, industrialists. A history written by those in power has turned roughnecks into founders. Meanwhile, the Indigenous peoples, the lands and natural world they knew were all literally erased from the map. The Beringia Centre was haunting.

## **Dawson City**

- Last settlement before the Dempster Highway.
- Frontier mission architecture, dogsleds, mushers, stagecoach skimmers, cat-trains, cabins, Norcan.
- Freedom-crazed students in a dormitory town; drunks in the Bunkhouse.
- The Odd Gallery (part of the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture) featured Toni Hafkenscheid, a Dutch photographer currently based in Toronto. Woozy images of gas stations, suburbs, a lot of CPR trains. Captured the surreality of the road, of transience, of life on a ceaselessly mutable planet.
- Westminster Hotel, aka the Pit where the locals go. It is pink and a great landmark.
- Student server at the Triple JJJ Hotel lives in a cabin at the edge of town with no running water. She is heading off to Concordia University (Montréal) to study photography.
- “This Business Supports Placer Mining. Placer Mining Supports This Place.”
- Ubiquity of Robert Service and Jack London.
- Met the Andersons again on the patio at Klondike Kate’s. “So we meet again.” This time we exchanged names and email addresses. Jim works for a drilling company, currently contracted to Shell. Louise is an appraiser of land grants. They’re from Terrace BC, and have been very good company on the way. I’m sorry we can’t continue convoying with them.
- Excellent visitors’ centres, wish I could spend some time with Evelyn at the Dempster Centre. She’s an intelligent, humorous Indigenous woman, who laughs over how everyone thinks she’s Japanese. I admit I would have guessed that. She tipped us off about a gravel pit hideaway along the Dempster for sleeping.
- Mud, boardwalks. Buildings sink into permafrost. “Let history lie.”

### **Dempster-driving**

- Canada’s most northern highway, an all-weather gravel road through many eco-regions. It crosses the Arctic Circle and crosses the Yukon into the Northwest Territories, terminating in Inuvik.
- Construction was sparked by Diefenbaker’s “Roads to Resources” and was intended to “access the natural resources of Northern Canada. Can anyone say mid-century colonial plunder? The new goldrush busted, construction of the highway languished until 1979 when it resumed to accommodate oil exploration in the Mackenzie Delta and Beaufort Sea. – The Dempster was built over permafrost, during winter to avoid melting of the ice-land. Much of the road sits on a gravel pad to insulate frozen substrate as the dark road surface heats.
- Forest fires, ditches, mining relics, Antimony Mountain, North Klondike Range slopes toward Tombstone. (Tombstoning: the act of stealing identity through recording information taken from cemeteries, especially babies and children.)
- Road crosses ecosystems, watersheds, glaciation. Triangular peaks, U-shaped valleys, steep-walled ridges, Ice Age rubble. I feel as if I have embarked on a journey through Middle Earth.
- This is the place where most tourists turn back. Jagged skyline. Syenite. Igneous intrusions punched overlying sediment in a brawl that took place about ninety million years ago.
- A glacier flowed down North Klondike River Valley as far as the low undulating hills near the river bend.
- Broad gravel flat of river contains terminal moraine. Groundwater seeps all winter and builds a thick ice pan that persists into summer.
- Tarns, tundra, willow and birch.
- Lines of language, culture, trace narratives, routes, trails, dreamlines.
- Inukshuks in every turn-out.
- Riverlines, shorelines, sastrugi. Horizons, fissures, eruptions, folds, pleats, planes, hallucinatory colours, textures. The sheer vastness.

## **Beringia**

- I have never seen this combination of flora, fauna and geology before. I feel I am in an ancient world that extends into forever, a world that has existed all along without me ever knowing it existed. I have lost all sense of time, and my only connection to the world I left is the narrow curving road.
- The most recent ice age started almost three million years ago, repeated advances, interglacial periods. Great lobes of ice-choked valleys, smothered mountain tops. Glaciers left remains, gravel in valley bottoms, terraces, canyons, stressed bedrock.
- Meanwhile, climate change caused sea levels to drop and Beringia Strait became a grassy plane, a cold dry land extending from Stewart Crossing across Alaska to Siberia, a subcontinent where animals, plants, insects, people crossed from Asia to North America.
- We continued our passage through this mythic world with the Beringia Four; the Giant Beaver, the Short-Faced Bear, the Scimitar Cat and the Woolly Mammoth.
- Oxbow detours.
- Continental Divide rest area. I felt I could sail through the universe in the outhouse.
- Near-continuous permafrost, which is permanently frozen soil insulated by a spongy mass of moss and lichens.
- The word “tundra” comes from the Finnish word “tunturi,” which means “treeless plain.” In reality a thin active layer of soil thaws during summer. Roots can’t penetrate deeply enough to support a tall tree but there are trees that remain low to the ground.
- Angelcomb Peak; Blackstone Uplands; Surfbird Ridge; Two-Moose Lake.
- Potholes, washboard, rock, thermokarst lakes.
- Early technique of road-building on permafrost consisted of scraping off the surface then laying down a thick layer of gravel. The gravel pad for this road section was delayed for a year. Meanwhile, the permafrost melted creating a thermokarst lake.
- Gentle pingos with cores of solid ice.
- Taiga range. Saw pikas collecting dried plants, some moody young caribou, playful little foxes and their burrows. Gyr falcons over fossil coral.

- Mountains rolling like whales in mist.
- This is not travel from point to point, a line on a map. Rather, we move through light, dark and time, no destinations apart from this, a compass is useless, words are pointless, I could lose myself forever here.
- Road follows Engineer Creek to Ogilvie River; drunken boreal forest perched on a shifting layer of permafrost, covered by thin shrub-insulated ground, black spruce careening in the freeze-thaw heave of soil that holds their shallow root systems.
- Weird carnival of trees, twisted, emaciated, miscegenated trees with two crowns, extra branches. Trees march, stagger, brawl by the side of the road. Revelry, voodoo rites, ritual sacrifice. Dionysian mysteries. Swooning, collapsing. They bear sceptres, crowns, shrunken heads. Passing out in permafrost stupor, becoming wilder and more sinister as the sky becomes red and then darkens.
- Mineral water, sheep licks, red creeks. Gypsum, salt, sulfide-bearing sediment. Calcium, magnesium, bicarbonate, sulfate, hydrogen sulfate, sodium, chlorine.
- Ogilvie Mountains, spectral grey
- Tors (tortured rock). Towers, spikes, minarets. Water seeps into cracks and joints in bedrock, freezes and expands, forces rock apart until stones fall down the slope. Found only in unglaciated terrain. If glaciated, the tors would have been bulldozed by ice leaving steep smooth rock walls.
- Arches (anticlines); troughs (synclines).
- Steeply dipping shale beds. Elephant rock (an elefont).
- Floodplain, tall balsam poplar; white spruce sinks roots
- Eagle Plain Plateau; another drunken parade, black spruce, tamarack, dwarf birch, willowgrass, lichens, mosses.
- Burn area, drunken forest partied too hard, a sepulchral morning after, revelry turned to debauch.
- Accompanied for a while by a truck driver, who announced his whereabouts along the road.

- Road dropped, crossed glacial outwash, climbed again, left the drunken forest behind then crossed the Arctic Circle and reached the NWT border.

### **Eagle Plains Hotel: Population 8.**

- While Fred talked to truck driver I took a short walk in the setting sun. Last chance for gas, food, lodging. All Dempster drivers end up here. We knew we would stop here a year ago when we first conceived this journey.
- We slept in the Deli under a bridge where a plaque commemorated Albert (or maybe Johnny) Johnson and the manhunt for the Mad Trapper of Rat River.
- Doubled back to the hotel for breakfast, a village of tourists, workers, student servers; a functional hotel in shades of brown and green. A young First Nations woman, working at the hotel, cried when her family left. Although the hotel was build in a permafrost environment they found an area with surface bedrock and were able to build a pad without having to construct pilings

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- Phantom airstrip, cutbank shales, fossil plants, brush-neededled tamarack
- Arctic Circle, where the sun never drops below the horizon.
- Trees reappear, sheltered from tundra by warmer soil.
- Treeline meanders according to river valleys, southern exposure, winds.
- Open tundra
- Yukon-NWT border. A ribbon of road going and going and going forever. To the Misty Mountains.

### **Richardson Mountains**

- Dark shale and sandstone deposited in a deep basin about 450 million years ago. Climate too dry for glacier formation. Tectonic forces from the east buckled unsuspecting sediment, fomented a mountain range.
- These mountains were named after explorer, John Richardson, who surveyed the Arctic coast with the Franklin Expedition and wrote: “Nowhere did I see anything worthy of your pencil. So much for the country. It is a barren subject and deserves to be thus briefly dismissed.” (!!!)
- “You Are Now Leaving the Unglaciaded Area.” We’ve been dodging in and out of it for ages now.
- Road weaves through folded mountains, upland plateau, descends to the Peel River Midway.
- Unfinished lean-tos, three-walled cabins, outhouses. Hunting camp? The guide book says this is the site of the annual Midway Music Festival. It seems we just missed yet another music festival on our trip.
- Road descends into the Mackenzie lowlands.
- Peel River Crossing. A jovial crew directed us onboard the cable ferry to Tsiigetichic, which is in Gwi’ichin Territory, and the next leg of the Dempster.
- Interpretive centre at Nitainlaih (water flowing out in all directions) Territorial Park where “Mr Charlie” stamped our passports.

### **Fort McPherson and the Lost Patrol**

- Aklavik Air; Chief Julius Ave; Co-Op Hotel; another Anglican church; Margaret’s Handicraft Shop; duelling gas pumps; feuds with Inuit
- Population 900, home of the Telin Gwich’in and the Fort McPherson Tent and Canvas Company.
- Burial site of the Lost Patrol, a story told and re-told since Dawson City. Inspector Francis J Fitzgerald of the Royal North West Mounted Police led a dogsled gong show that went down in history as a valiant rescue attempt.



- The Dawson City/Fort McPherson winter patrol of the RNWP covered 760 km, following the Peel River and the east flank of the Richardson Mountains, carrying on down the Peel River to the mouth of Wind River to Dawson City. All other patrols had originated at Dawson City where supplies were available. This patrol, originating at Fort McPherson in December 1910, was more poorly supplied.
- Fitzgerald declined the services of Gwi'ch'in guide, Esau George, who knew the route well. Fitzgerald's chosen guide, Sam Carter, made a fatal navigational error, took the patrol off course and used up precious supplies in -50 temperatures.
- When the group finally decided to return to Fort McPherson they faced extreme cold, gale force winds and heavy snow. The men killed and ate the dogs in their sled team but eventually perished of starvation and crushing cold.
- In March 1911 the bodies were found by a search party commanded by WJD Dempster (Dempster Highway). The bodies of Fitzgerald and Carter were found only 38 miles from Fort McPherson.
- All members of the Lost Patrol are buried in Fort McPherson beside the Church of England mission, which is now St Matthew's Anglican Church.
- I'm sure I read somewhere that the Lost Patrol set out to rescue a group of Gold Rush stampedeers. Yet the account from *Canada's Western Arctic* says Fitzgerald and Co set out to make a dogsled trip in record time. To me, the dogsled record account sounds only too real and the rescue sounds like revisionism. But what do I know?

## **Inuvik**

- Reindeer grazing at Rengling River
- Ehjounjik Day Use
- Mike Zubko Airport Junction leading to Inuvik. We bobbed up and down past Júk Territorial Park into Inuvik. Stayed at Happy Valley Territorial Park.
- Inuvik was conceived by the Canadian government in 1953, intended to replace the hamlet of Aklavik in the Mackenzie Delta, which was subject to flooding and offered little space for expansion.

- Originally called “East Three” by survey parties who spread over the Mackenzie Delta searching for townsite locations. “East Three” was chosen for its large flat area, navigable waterway, tree cover and gravel supply.
- First called “New Aklavik” to reflect the transfer of facilities from Aklavik. This caused delivery confusion, so the name “Inuvik” was chosen in 1958, meaning “place of people” in Inuvialuktun.
- Became an official town with elected reps in 1970. Meanwhile, Aklavik is still hanging on with a population of 900 or so.
- Life as a permafrost town. Ground under Inuvik is frozen year-round to a depth of 350 meters, massive sheets of pure ice sit below the surface. The “active layer” on top of the permafrost thaws each summer.
- To prevent heat transfer from warm buildings to the frozen ground, most structures are on pile foundations with a metre or so air space. The piles are steamed or drilled five metres into the ground.
- No basements in Inuvik but many houses have suspended basements and living areas on the second floors.
- Because of permafrost, water and sewage pipes are enclosed in a serpentine network of aboveground utilidors that run through Inuvik’s backyards.

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- No sleep on the first night. Kids playing on into the night, trucks, dirtbikes, generators, eternal light. I lay on the mattress in the Deli reciting (silently) multiplication tables to put myself to sleep. Must have eventually drifted off in spite of the light and noise. I knew it would be a midnight sun, but knowing something mentally didn’t mean my body was ready for it.
- Permafrost town. Utility corridors, utilidor housing, houses on pilings. “Smartie-boxes.”
- Café Gallery. Delicious sandwiches prepared by two sweet men who looked sunburnt in the Northern sun.

- *Inuvik Drum* (newspaper): “Quiet in town, so many people on the land for the spring hunt – May to Sept.”
- Fat white man at the Café Gallery wearing a muscle shirt and tie-dye expounded about the processing of crack cocaine to a group of three middleaged white men.
- Super crew cabs; “Aboriginal Day.”
- CKIB 101.9: the Voice of Denendeh. Top 30 Countdown; Good Medicine Show; Tropical Outlaw Music; rebroadcasts of the GNWT Legislative Assembly sessions.
- Annual Hide Tanning Camp at 8 Mile: “Inuvik elder Tommy Thrasher recruited to stand guard against bears in the evening.”
- DIAND (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development).
- Everything alive and running all night. There is no night. Kids, dirtbikes, generators, mosquitos.
- The roost is owned by Muslim who are planning to build a mosque. The Back Room is hunting-lodge ambience with wood panelling and a life-sized wall-eyed polar bear in the corner and a bison head lunging from the opposite wall. So much taxidermy everywhere up north. Revising, or maybe adding some nuance to my views on hunting.
- Smokers under the No Smoking sign at the Mad Trapper Inn.
- *Inuvik Drum* announcement: Squatters on land within Akaitcho Territory. These People have not obtained the necessary approvals under either the Territorial Lands Act or the Commissioners Land Act. As a result, it is estimated that there are 350 cabins and related structures located in traditional Dene land in Akaitcho Territory without any authority.

### **Igloo Church**

- A genuinely beautiful Catholic church, built by Brother Maurice Larocque and Father Joseph Adam. Larocque conceived and built the church then had to retrace his steps and come up with a blueprint.
- Self-taught Inuit artist, Mona Thrasher, painted the panels depicting the stations of the cross.

- This church is an example of intuitive thinking put into action. Beautiful, functional and improbable. Fred and I were allowed to climb up to the attic and get a closer look at the construction and the blueprint created after the church was built.
- It's one of the few buildings in town that rests on a gravel base and concrete pad.

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- At North Mart you can buy plastic wreaths, bouquets and crosses. If I hadn't seen many indigenous cemeteries on my travels, I would have been completely baffled by the demand for plastic flowers.
- Taxis everywhere in Inuvik.
- Windows of Samuel Hearne high school boarded up to prevent vandalism. Youth Centre closed until "someone returns the soccer balls and equipment."
- Lovely Centennial Library; I wanted to turn in a resumé.
- Ingamo Hall Friendship Centre, largest log building north of the Arctic Circle. Now that I know about the drunken forest and the elusive tree line I can really appreciate how the structure had to be built from logs and rafted down the Mackenzie River from Fort Simpson.

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- Met Lorne Brown and Lori Fyffe (a guess at spelling), two engineers, both working for the territorial government. They are from the Maritimes and told us they have found a home here. Lorne is from Newfoundland while Lori is a "spud from PEI." Lorne gave us a guided tour and glowed with affection for his adopted town. Lorne is one of Fred's CASARA contacts.
- They live in a very professional-looking house with cathedral ceiling in a new suburb. It is set on stilts high enough to accommodate an outdoor basement. We ate takeout pizza from the Roost.

- Lorne told us about the very successful Inuvialuit Corporate Group. Most of the contractors on the Mackenzie Gas project are with this group. We visited the Corporate Centre and found a stunning office suite, family photos in the corridors, boardrooms decorated with sculptures and masks.
- A Social Services agent sells high quality Inuit art from her office. She cheerily kept working as we browsed. A woman showed up and Fred and I had to leave the office. Turned out the woman was related to a family drowned in a boating accident that happened en route to a whaling camp. It wasn't a hardship looking at the photos and reading the stories while we waited. Eventually we were invited back inside.
- Office as community centre. Fusion of work, home, family, community, business. What a truly subversive business model this is to the brutish binary divisions in the South.
- We spent two nights at Happy Valley, two nights at Júk campground. RCMP bush party on second night. Ravens everywhere. I never realized they could make so many sounds. I thought there were fifty types of birds, croaking, ribbiting, clicking, hoo-ing, trilling, etc etc.

### **Tuktoyaktuk**

- We decided we had to take the tour. The small plane was running two hours late – Tuk time.
- End of road, end of line, end of world
- Pingos! Pingos form in recently drained lakes. The sandy ground beneath a lake is unfrozen but is surrounded by permafrost. Once the lake drains the permafrost begins to spread into the unfrozen sediments as they become exposed to frigid winter temperatures.
- Water in the saturated sand freezes and expands, pushing excess water ahead of the freezing ground. Permafrost circles the centre of the lake. Excess water comes under increasing pressure. Pressurized water is trapped between the continuous permafrost below and the much weaker freezing crust of the lake bed above. Water finally pushes the lake bed up, up and up. When the lake completely freezes the pingo stops growing.

- the Tuk peninsula has the highest concentration of pingos in the world. Ibyuk is the tallest and is still growing, about two cms a year.
- This indicates that the basin of Ibyuk Lake is not yet frozen through, even though the Ibyuk pingo is probably more than 1,000 years old.
- Got to see Ibyuk through the plane window; conical lightly baked pastry. “Ibyuk walks at night.”
- Maze of channels and interconnecting lakes, flooded lowlands, remnant land, ground inundated by sea. Mackenzie River, the principal stream contributing to the delta.
- Finally seeing the Mackenzie Delta, after dreaming about it for two years, marvelling over satellite photos and bathymetry charts for the Niglingtak Project.
- Our tour guide, David Gruben, is an Inuit trying to learn his language. University-educated, he returned to Tuk and his children go to boarding school in Calgary. Friendly, humorous, pro-tourist. He told us Tuk kids always want to leave but most return. He supposes he’s one of them. He said we could say we met a “real Eskimo.”
- Houses and boats on a trembling spit of land; breath-takingly ephemeral.
- Some tour guide history: Before European contact the Inuvialuit were scattered all along the coast. Tuk was briefly known as Port Brabant, unsurprisingly named after a Hudson’s Bay commissioner. In 1931 a transport camp was constructed at Tuk to take advantage of the harbour, followed by a general store and trading post. Oil was discovered at Prudhoe Bay, then at Atkinson Point in 1970, 90 kms north of Tuk. Oil companies surged into the area, drill ships, tugboats, icebreakers, construction materials and camps.
- I saw two hotels, a territorial campground, two grocery/dry goods stores, an auto service station, health centre, general stores, craft stores open on demand. Pentecostal, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches.
- Dirtbikes, small children who waved at us, slo-pitch, sod house replica, TransCanada Trail marker

### **Community freezer**

- Along with my tour group I climbed down a steep ladder into the frozen underworld of permafrost, thirteen metres beneath the surface. It was fascinating. Came upon a large chamber with rooms where families keep their meat cold year-round; caribou, beluga.
- Eerie beauty of ice crystals coated ceilings and walls, layers of permafrost revealed in the walls.
- One of the toughest things I've ever done in my life was climbing down that steep ladder, feeling my feet slip on the icebound lower steps but I could not let my fear of falling keep me from descending to the underworld. I could have stayed behind without looking bad. One of the women decided not to tackle the ladder, which meant I wouldn't have been standing alone at the top. But I am so glad I did it.
- Little rooms carved in the earth, oddly pliant, spongy, frozen turf of permafrost walls, layers of colour, sparkling ice crystals
- After emerging from the freezer, I wandered the rocky shores and waded into the Arctic Ocean.
- Still can't express my thrill at seeing Tuk, physically being in a land that had become mythical to me, flying over the Delta, standing at the end of the TransCanada Trail.
- Before we boarded the little plane taking us back to Inuvik, David rubbed noses with us, "Eskimo-style."

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- Neither of us in any hurry to leave Inuvik.
- Lori took us on a tour of the communal greenhouse, supervised by a woman from New Zealand. I watered plots and ate sweet beans and peas.
- Hot; kids everywhere.
- Met another couple travelling in a Delica. To Fred's chagrin, they had made it to Tuk by Deli.

– Fred went off to exchange maps and GPS stuff with Lorne and I cooled off at the Mackenzie Hotel with a bottle of Yukon beer. I think the whole town was here. When I requested a pint, the server told me they can't get kegs up here. Of course not! The Yukon beer was dark and tasty.

### **Return to the Dempster Highway**

– Fireweed, moss campion, chickweed, yellow cinquefoil, red raspberries, blueberries.  
– Bleached bone, tibia, femurs, antlers.  
– Boulder canyons, debris, shuddering land, squelching feet.  
– Geological amphitheater, ancient ice, winds, vegetation like worn velvet.  
– Mountains worn to roundness, sheared here and there by broken rock.

### **A night in Beringia**

– One of the high points of the entire journey. Two tiny figures entering a huge past, the portal of prehistory. Echo chamber, singing winds.  
– Curled up in the back of the Deli it felt as if we had time-travelled, we were the only two people on earth. Two RVs had pulled off at a rest stop a few kms away. I've never felt so alone in my life and knowing they were there was weirdly comforting. The only thing close to this I can imagine is if I found out there was life in other galaxies of the universe.  
– The vastness, the silence, the aloneness. A wonderful, incredible experience.  
– Morning, we picked berries while keeping a sharp look-out for bears. Warnings posted everywhere.



### **Tsiigetchich (Sigichick)**

- Another turn on the mad ferry, which meandered about and touched ground wherever it felt like.
- We got off at Tsiigetchich, located at the confluence of the Arctic Red River and the Mackenzie.
- Mud, wind, dryfish, berries, wolf carcasses
- Band Council office, reception area and rooms with cubicles inside a weathered barnlike building perched on stilts. Bulletin boards choked with government brochures and circulars written in an all-too familiar passive-aggressive bureaucratese.
- Poster: “Looking for the person who dumped caribou meat [photo of discarded meat]. Game animals are not to be wasted, abandoned, left aside.”
- Bleak hilltop graveyard, lambasted by wind, ravens on steeples. As in every indigenous cemetery I have visited, this community is in the process of mapping and identifying old graves. Old wooden markers with handwritten death dates sunken in overgrown plots so much more poignant to me than the ones with newly placed headstones, covered in plastic sheets and plastic flowers. The custom of plastic flowers is still impenetrable to me.

### **Moosehide**

- Re-visited Dawson City. First Nations bands were holding a festival at Moosehide and provided motorboats for everyone who wished to cross over from Dawson City. Got to ride on a motorboat.
- The camp consisted of yet another mission church flanked by cabins. A man played folk music in one of the tents. The same students who sang and danced at the Grand Theatre in Dawson City were clogging around here too. Caribou smokies. The locals milled and greeted each other. A lot of country music.
- Fred and I decided to return via the Moosehide Trail, which was described as an hour-long, Easy trail at the Visitor’s Centre. Beautiful until it started to deteriorate and we had to bushwhack for quite a while.

- Stunning look-out; Dawson City spread out below us.
- And then, the Trail from Hell. Rock slides, scree, terrifying drops. Fred was heroic. One spot was particularly terrifying for me. No trail, nowhere to plant my feet. He's a mountain goat, crossed to a more stable spot then returned for me.
- I held his hand, followed the footsteps he had dug into the side of the mountain. I focused on rocks, roots. I banged every part of my body, squatting, bending, twisting, clutching. I kept myself from looking down.
- Finally ended up back in Dawson City. I was woozy, shaky, every bone in my body aching. Fred said I was a trooper and that it was probably because I had conquered some fear of heights by climbing down into the freezer at Tuk.
- Began the recovery process at Bombay Peggy's. A sumptuous Victorian Inn, which was once a brothel. It was expensive but I had wanted to stay here since our first time around. I don't think I have ever been more grateful for a comfortable bed, a bath (in a wonderful old tub) and soft dressing gown. I almost cried with relief and joy. I don't think I could have endured a night camped in the Deli after the day's battering.
- At night drunken students rolled around on the lawn outside our window. Bears could have been dancing around a stewpot. It was all good. Fred was a hero and I was still alive.

### **Whitehorse redux**

- Met Ian Basso and his partner, Karen Brost, at Walmart where none of us ever go! We were using the parking lot for an automotive check-up. Ian is an old friend of Fred's from his Astral Photo days in Montréal. They haven't seen each other in fifteen years.
- Stayed with him and Karen in their trailer on Lobird Road. Ian is not a film-maker with a day job as immigration officer. Interesting man. The first, and probably only Black man to work as photographer's assistant at Hasidic weddings. He told us he hated Montréal and moved to Vancouver and worked as an exterminator. Hilarious roach stories.

– He and Karen make an interesting couple. Karen is a bus driver for Whitehorse Transpo, very down-to-earth. A terrific designer and gardener. She recently drove and camped through the Australian outback with her daughter, Natalya, who sometimes stays in the trailer.

– Like Lorne Brown, Ian has found a home in the north and still can't believe he landed this job and becoming a "late-blooming professional." "I made it," he said. "I made good in the Little City."

– Ian was just how I remembered him from Montréal. His eyes grow far away. His lids lower. He's no longer with us. Something inside him detaches and a grill rolls down. Karen hugs him, wraps a blanket around him. Part of him responds, a deeper part remains aloof. He treats her, and the two of us, like royalty, possibly compensating for his essential aloneness. He and Karen have been together for two years. I like them both and hope they make it together.

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– Met Ian at work and saw his office. Also saw him advising a client; very conscientious. Went for a walk with him and his dog Sadie along the beautiful trail above 10 Mile Canyon.

– After dinner Ian showed us one of his films, *Saved*. The Vancouver footage was brilliant. Karen assisted him in filming that sequence. "It was horrible," she said. "It was dark. I'm not used to that." We watched him adjust light and colour on his computer.

– I found it hard to pry myself away from a real bed, shower, laundry, kindness, generosity. I also love Whitehorse and could see myself living there. But we couldn't be the nightmare guests who wouldn't leave and we set off the next day.

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– Are there any government policies on the North not based on the preconceptions of outsiders? Land claims, ecology, social services enacted on the concept of the arctic, administered by legislators whose own experiences of the North are shaped entirely by the accounts of colonialists who cared only about personal possession and dominance.

- How did the writings of men, whose function was to advise southern bureaucracies for purposes of policy, entitlement and possession, become adventure narrative? Robert Service was a banker. He turned Gold Rush devastation into “the good old days,” elevating a time that never really existed into pop culture canon.
- Just as *Happy Days* turned a grim conformist Cold War era into a happyland of virgins, malt shops and cuddly juvenile delinquents, Service turned a terrifying exodus of depression-crazed losers into a *Boy's Own* world of adventure, heroism in the Last Frontier.
- Official US Customs agent. I would have politely asked if we could return to Canada if he had insisted on taking the Delica apart to inspect it. Skagway not worth the effort of disassembling Fred's ingeniously packed rooftop supplies. But we were grudgingly allowed into the Land of the Free.

### **Skagway**

- Ended up at the Alaska Marine Highway system ferry terminal.
- Holland-America cruise ship, a gigantic wedding cake, our first view of Skagway.
- Lucky timing. Hundreds of people lining up to reboard ship. Looked like earthlings boarding a huge colonial spaceship, preparing to return to Luna City.
- Here up north, the terminal has the same rating system used when predicting forest fires. Only here there is no “Low” or “Moderate” or “High.” Here, Level 1 is “Significant.”
- Much more touristy and “hard-sell” than Dawson City. Similar false fronts and boardwalks but here they are all tarted up. Fur stores, jewelry stores, generic no-name furs and jewelry. No stories, artist information, local history.
- Samuel Hearne wrote his account for the Hudson's Bay Co. All of these great northern mavericks worked for the Man. Their writings documented the landscape, the Indigenous tribes as extensions of their own experiences, dismissing all that couldn't be culled for production as barren.

– Part of me wants to stay in Whitehorse, join those who are taking back history, creating cultural centres from colonial poison, reclaiming their dead, cutting and pasting posters, assembling homemade displays of flora and fauna in off-track visitor centres. I would love to be one of the people etching the flowers and leaping salmon into the sidewalks of Whitehorse.

### **Whitehorse to Skagway**

- Emerald Lake, bluegreen reflecting off white sediment on lake bottom. Marl, fragments of decomposed shell mixed with clay.
- Carcross Desert, known as the world's smallest desert and site of an international program for ecological studies. Composed of sandy lake-bottom material left behind by a large glacier. Looks like snowdrifts. Low trailing evergreens with small leathery leaves.
- Carcross town, stopping place for the ubiquitous gold stampeder. White Pass & Yukon Route railway. Bishop Bompas.
- Tagish Lake, Windy Arm, Lime Mountain.
- Road shifts through Northwest Territories, Yukon, Northern BC. Gorges, waterfalls, steep grades.
- Canada Customs at Fraser.
- Summit Lake, rocky valley, subalpine. Transition between treed lower elevations and true alpine above treeline. Also transition between Canada and the US.
- Giant cruise ship threatening to swallow the town.
- “Days of ‘98,” show featuring Soapy Smith. I think Soapy Smith is Alaska's Mad Trapper, but I couldn't find any plaques or interpretative panels with his story.
- Sockeye Cycle, Klothes Rush, Glacier Flight, Klondike Gold Dredge Tours.
- Reminders that this is Amerika: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Southern Baptist Convention.

- Humungous Westmark Hotel servicing cruise ship clientele.
- North to Alaska: Alaskan and Russian Gifts, Russian nesting dolls, ulu knives, eskimo dolls (yes, they are sold as “eskimo dolls.”
- Frontier greed and exploitation. “Cries of ‘gold in the Yukon’ still echo from steep canyon walls.” I never saw this kind of copy in Dawson City.
- It seems most of the buildings in Skagway have been reconstructed. In Dawson City there are some wonderful buildings, tipsy, left to sink into permafrost. I’m not happy with my country these days but the difference between Dawson City and Skagway makes me raise the maple leaf again.
- Dawson City is smaller and certainly has its hokey Gold Rush side, but it also has a heart and spirit. Real people live there, who want you to know their stories and entice you into history and leave the old buildings to speak for themselves. In Skagway, they reconstruct history to pimp it out, turn the old buildings into luxury boutiques.

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- Canada Customs agent couldn’t have been more different from the American one. Young, urbane, pleasant. He asked about the Delica but only because he thought it was cool and compared it to his Land Rover. He reminded me a lot of our favourite server at the Divine Ambrosio but I didn’t detect a French accent.
- Pelly Crossing. Lodge, grocery store, hotel. Full of ghosts. A phantom left a bottle of baby formula on the rail. Teenaged boy approached us and asked if he could sign the Delica. I said I would love it if he did, he only had to respect the Dempster dirt. He laughed and signed.
- Car full of First Nations women blew a tire on a pothole and just made it to Pelly Crossing. Fred changed their tire for them. They offered to pay and we both refused. It could have been us. They thanked Fred but also thanked me – for my “kind patience.” I was very touched. No one has ever done that before. I hoped they made it to Dawson City on their spare tire.

### **Teslin again**

- This time able to visit Tlingit (Klinkit) Heritage Centre. Beautiful video, how Raven brought light to the world. A powerful story of love, loss, reconciliation.
- A museum exhibit: “The Last Morning.” Not your usual museum text. “A simple act of survival, played out each day in the wilderness. Not victim and villain, but components in nature, and for all, even the mighty and clever, there will be a last morning.” I love Northern lodges, museums, galleries, exhibits.
- Watched Master Carver Keith Wolf Smarche paint his first fibre-glass canoe. He usually works in wood. Saw his dug-out canoe and totem poles he carved and heard his stories of last-minute prep before the opening ceremony. Last-minute panic, paint drying even as the totems were raised.
- Inside the centre, Bristol boards with photographs of people fishing, tanning, hiding. So very personal and the guides know everyone in those photos. – The young student at the counter told us about some German tourists who spoke no English and spent their time dodging admission fees and camping for free in the parking lot.
- Met a feisty woman planning to do the Dempster in a converted school bus.

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- Hero’s welcome at Watson Lake. Dalyce remembered us. And this is where I’m going to end.